When Instruments Come to Life: An introduction to Russian folk instruments through the music of Russian Renaissance

By Miriam Tripaldi, UChicago Ph.D. candidate in Musicology

The ensemble Russian Renaissance – the celebrated winner of the Grand Prize at the 2017 M-Prize competition – is grounded in Russian heritage, national music, and traditional instruments. Yet what makes them unique is their constant search for new combinations of musics and traditions. All four musicians play piano and write arrangements, and all graduated from prestigious Russian musical state institutions.

If, as Philip V. Bohlman argued in 1988, “folk music can live in a community only through repetition or recreation, both of which characteristically require performer and audience,” Russian Renaissance creates and recreates life and community through an international musical repertoire combined and contrasted with — and filtered through — Russian traditional instruments and folk elements. They showcase material that ranges from tango to classical music (Bach, Rameau, and Tchaikovsky), and from jazz (Duke Ellington and Django Reinhardt) to new American folk music (Béla Fleck).

At the heart of their musical style is the balalaika, the triangular, wooden, three-stringed instrument from the lute family with a characteristic hollow body. In describing the balalaika, Tchaikovsky once stated: “how lovely is the balalaika. How striking the effect it makes in the orchestra. Timbrally – this is an indispensable instrument” (cited in Kiszko, 1995:145). What particularly captured Tchaikovsky’s ear was the sound of the tremolo technique, produced by the rapid up-and-down strokes with the index finger of the right hand. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tchaikovsky is one of the composers whose work Russian Renaissance most loves to perform.

The members of Russian Renaissance say that they offer audiences “world music with a Russian soul,” and they do so partly through their instrumentation. Ivan Kuznetsov plays the balalaika in its standard size, called the prima, which is usually tuned E–E–A (in approximately the same register as the middle of the violin’s range); Anastasia Zakharova plays domra alto (tuned E–A–D, roughly an octave below the balalaika); Alexander Tarasov plays the button (bayan) accordion – a free-reed aerophone, whose melody-right-hand keyboard consists of rows of buttons (like the left-hand button-board) arranged chromatically, which has a greater range than an accordion with a piano keyboard and a fuller sound in the bass; and Ivan Vinogradov plays the huge balalaika contrabasso (tuned E–A–D, in the same register as the modern string bass). All of these instruments are prominent in Eastern European traditions, more specifically in the folk Russian and Central Asian lands.

“Just as the uncle’s mushrooms and honey and liqueurs had seemed to her the most delicious in the world, this playing struck her at that moment as the very acme of musical expression.” So Tolstoy described what Natasha thought of Mitka’s balalaika playing in War and Peace, one of the most beloved and well-known books in Russia and abroad. The balalaika itself opens a window to a rich yet complex discussion of historical origins and uses, which, in turn, offers an illuminating perspective on the history of Russian Renaissance.
of Russian cultural development and geographical expansion. The balalaika officially enters Russian historical records in 1715, when emperor Peter the Great approved the organization of the celebratory plans for the wedding of privy councilor Nikita M. Zotov, for which there was balalaika entertainment. In the 18th century, the balalaika grew in popularity in both aristocratic and court circles, and its simple design and mass production helped to spread the instrument further. As the century progressed, the balalaika became the Russian instrument par excellence: “one finds this instrument in Russian houses, there is hardly a peasant who doesn’t know how to play one a little” (Labord, 1780).

Historians and musicologists, having struggled in finding a precise origin for the balalaika, at least agree that it developed in the 18th century from the three-stringed domra, a round-bodied long-necked lute which we will see tonight played by Anastasia Zakharova. The domra was added to the earliest 11th-century instrumentarium by the skomorokhi, wandering minstrels and actors of Kievan Rus’ and later Muscovite Russia, who had previously accompanied their solo and ensemble performances with various folk instruments. In 1648, with the decree “On the Righting of Morals and the Abolition of Superstition” (cited in P.I. Ivanov, 1850) Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich, Peter the Great’s father, officially banned the skomorokhi along with their instruments.

Digging deeper, one might argue that the balalaika’s history may go back to the 13th century – if one accepts its Russian acquisition via Tatar invasions of Russia – or that its roots lie in ancient instruments – if one considers its triangular shape as the key, connecting it, for instance, to the triangular psaltery or the Egyptian trigonon. Martin Kiszko has also suggested that the possible shift from round/oval to the triangular shape of the balalaika may reflect a change in Russian architectural style that took place in Russia in the 16th century when the tent-shaped roof supplanted the bulb-shaped cupola. It was in the late 19th century, however, that Vasily Andreyev, folklorist, musician, and composer, developed five different sizes of balalaika – prima, tenor, alto, bass, and contrabass – to cover the usual range of a symphony orchestra, to which were later added two more: piccolo and soprano.

Whether the balalaika represents a natural transition from the domra manufactured in a triangular form; was a version of the Central Asian instrument, dombra, with a new name; or it was a totally new instrument which substituted the Russian domra is ultimately not important. Both the balalaika and the domra encapsulate the Russian folk tradition. For centuries, the balalaika was considered a folk instrument on which a performer might display virtuosic skill, and the spread of balalaika orchestras in Western Europe and the United States after the 1980s is both a sign of a renewed interest in the folk tradition and a need to look at the classical repertoire through experimental and renewed lenses, as Russian Renaissance does.